

Response to Les Hall

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I would like to see more emphasis on the consequences of taxonomic studies to bat conservation in Australia. This is mentioned, but in the context of a couple of specific species. The species level taxonomy of Australian bats has improved over the last couple

of years, but much still remains to be done. The conservation consequences are that many "species" currently considered unendangered may turn out to be complexes of species, some of which may be highly endangered.

Response to Bat conservation in Australia

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The limited information on the biology, status and management of Australia's bats which Hall refers to in his paper is not different from the paucity of information for most of Australia's wildlife. The small number of wildlife biologists in Australia and the emphasis on laboratory studies through the 1960s have made the present demands to base the management and conservation of Australia's biota on a solid scientific basis difficult to meet. Meeting these demands has not been made any easier by the anti-intellectual and anti-science posturing of politicians in Canberra. The restrictions on funds for research, to CSIRO, and to the universities during the 1980s set back science in Australia by more than a decade. Of greatest concern is the shortage of trained scientists which will worsen through the 1990s. It will be particularly hard to regain the momentum in wildlife studies required to provide the kinds of data on animals such as bats so urgently needed to ensure their survival as part of this continent's biota.

Although I agree with Hall on the need for much more work on bats as possible keystone species, I do not agree that the emphasis should be on rare or endangered species. Given the limited resources available and the unlikely increase in funding to research through the 1990s, it makes more sense to emphasize studies on the more abundant, more easily studied bats and the application of the results of those studies to the conservation and management of rare or hard to study species. This may not be the most desirable approach, but is the most efficient and cost effective.

The willingness of politicians to respond to complaints about the depredations of fruit-bats (flying foxes) on orchards with support of control programmes and their unwillingness to protect important bat colonies where this may interfere with mining (e.g., Mt Etna in Queensland) reflects both an insensitivity to and ignorance of

ecological processes and the dependence of humans of a healthy environment, and the prevailing emphasis in Australia on growth and development regardless of the environmental consequences. The result has been and will continue to be the declining quality of life (as measured by environmental quality) throughout Australia which now contributes significantly to the nation's declining standard of living.

The issues I have referred to above will not be resolved until more scientists make their views known publicly. Thus I strongly reject the notion put by Hall that "a national co-ordinator" of bat study groups needs to be apolitical. Until wildlife biologists become much more political they will achieve few of their goals and do little for the conservation of Australia's biota. After all no one else, mining company executives, farmers, timber industry representatives and greenies, shrinks from the political arena, why should biologists or bat lovers?

Resolution of the problems identified by Hall concerning the conservation and management of bats requires a different approach to land management from that currently practised in Australia. Management with strong conservation objectives must be integrated across all land regardless of tenure or political boundaries. This will be difficult to achieve given the resistance to change from the timber lobby and farmers groups and their unwillingness to accept arguments that remnants of old growth forests and native vegetation must not be logged or cleared until we at least understand their importance to dependent fauna including bats and humans. Forest and land management agencies throughout Australia will need to be restructured with new objectives, new responsibilities, and new authority. National controls over the clearing of native vegetation need to be instituted. I am not optimistic of achieving this within the next decade or even the next century, particularly if we remain apolitical, as Hall would have us be.